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SUBJECT: Press Pans Former Secretary Baker's Visit

Ref: Ulaanbaatar 163

11. Summary: Much of Mongolia's press reacted negatively to a visit to Ulaanbaatar by former Secretary of State James Baker. Secretary Baker is remembered warmly by many Mongolians as the man behind the strengthening of bilateral ties after Mongolia's 1990 democratic revolution. His visit here March 25-29 was officially at the invitation of the Mongolian Government and was heralded by the government as the first visitor in Mongolia's 2006 800th anniversary celebrations. When it became apparent both in his meetings with government officials and remarks to the press that his other purpose in coming to Mongolia was in the capacity of legal counsel to and lobbyist for a Canadian mining company, Ivanhoe (Baker's law firm represents Ivanhoe and he and his party arrived on an Ivanhoe plane in the company of CEO Robert Friedland), the local press attacked his visit as a sham. Ivanhoe Mines is a Canadian firm that is developing a large and controversial mine in southern Mongolia (reftel). His visit, which coincided with heightened public attention to the mining sector on the eve of debate in parliamentary over revisions to the minerals law, unfortunately served to deepen the controversy surrounding foreign investment in the mining sector. Due to conflict of interest concerns, Embassy maintained a discreet distance from the visit. Ambassador hosted a private coffee for the Secretary and an Emboff sat in his call on President Enkhbayar -- at the GOM's invitation. Embassy was not otherwise involved in this private visit. End Summary.

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An Official Unofficial Celebratory Visit  
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12. Initially the Mongolian press was positive, though low key, about the visit. The Mongolian government said that Secretary Baker was invited by the Mongolian Ambassador to

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the US and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. No reason for the visit was officially announced but word was put out that it was connected to Mongolia's 800th anniversary celebrations and Secretary Baker's desire to establish academic ties between his foundation and Mongolian institutions. Several papers ran short retrospectives on Secretary Baker's role in US-Mongolian relations, and

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television stations showed clips from his two visits to Mongolia as Secretary of State.

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Maybe Another Reason for the Visit?  
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¶3. However, the pro-government papers were mostly neutral (though notably not as positive as might normally be the case). "Unen" ("Truth") said Secretary Baker's message was, "The Stability Agreement is not for the gain of one side and loss of the other side," and "Zuuny Medee" ("Century News") paraphrased Secretary Baker this way: "I came to remind that Mongolia is wasting time by delaying the stability agreement."

¶4. The opposition press was less polite: "Onoodor" ("Today") said "The two James Bakers' are pressuring the Mongolian Government," and "Odriin Sonin" ("Today's News") asked "What was the real reason for James Baker's visit? Interference in Mongolia's internal affairs." "Onoodor" also had the toughest article, with a headline: "Lobbyist Baker, don't ever come to Mongolia again." The following article claimed Secretary Baker's visit was a last ditch attempt to "save the family business."

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Comment

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¶5. From the comments in the media and from discussions with reporters and editors, the main source of the antagonism seems to be the feeling among the press that they were intentionally misled by the Mongolian government on the nature and reason for Secretary Baker's visit to Mongolia. Even the pro-government press was caught off-guard by Secretary Baker's reported advocacy on the Ivanhoe issue.

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And the opposition press was incensed that an official guest of the Mongolian government would lobby the Prime Minister on a private business issue.

¶6. Ambassador Slutz hosted a Sunday afternoon coffee for the Secretary and his party on the first day of his visit, and Acting DCM sat in on Secretary Baker's March 21 meeting with Mongolian President Enkhbayar -- at the GOM's invitation. Embassy did provide information on "think tanks" that could be potential partners of the Baker Institute. Embassy Ulaanbaatar was not otherwise involved in this private visit.

Slutz